

DELTA

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delta

PABLO NERUDA: Two Poems,

translated by ROBERT WELLS

RODNEY BANISTER

L. E. BRATHWAITE

MARY DYER

F. S. GRUBB

PHILIP HEAD

JOHN MANDER

HUBERT NICHOLSON

IRIS ORTON

PETER REDGROVE

Drawing by BARBARA SHERLOCK

Edited by PETER REDGROVE

and MILES ATTERTON

who thank all those who have
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Spring 1954



THE GOOD LISTENER

Drawing by BARBARA SHERLOCK. Pencil and Wash.

ODYSSEY

So, since evening made the distant hard horizon
draw closer, grow intimate and tender even,
and could transform his theoretic majesty
to sceptred fact for any make-shift chance Penelope,
for months he would forget his homeland Ithaca.

Yet, her green flesh seemed an ocean where he would hear,
waking unsatisfied from sleep, the far thunder
fall and surge of calling seas within her shell-smooth breasts—
though these, to tears, hardened like the pine-cones of his coasts,
and he forgot again his homeland Ithaca.

And if some exiles do take goats' horns for an anchor?
Be sure he knew complexities of desire and fear
beyond the coward's clutch at easy substitutes
for his great voyage to the end of longing, or the brute's
crass instinct for any certain territorial Ithaca.

Consider, ten years of cynicism in a war he despised,
ten years' exploiting treachery, with a razed
city and the Thracians' blasphemous atrocities
as the bare final product of a decade's losses:
after, only fools could look to some unblemished Ithaca.

He guessed (correctly) that the rot of war had spread,
and in desperate infidelities merely played
for time—foreseeing conflict with his opportunist
gentry—though the stench of Troy was what dismayed him most,
polluting him and his remembered Ithaca.

But he was always conscious of that cold firm skyline
and setting sail at last achieved reunion—
though violent, not perhaps quite satisfactory,
since for such there is no real end of longing: guilty,
perfectionists, exiles, even in Ithaca.

RODNEY BANISTER

METROPOLITAIN

The giant negro corporal opposite
illegally lights up a foul cigarette,
employs the charred match to elaborate
the calloused contours of one livid palm,
yet never lifts his awed resentful gaze
beyond the streaked and ageing uppers
of a grey-lipped priest who blinks and slavers
out the Vulgate from a pocket text.

Warrior and Priest, rocked between unsealed
millennia of decay, through strata where
the passage of each loosened culture
is cheaply chronicled in coins and pottery,
resign their tutored hearts to a pretence of hate
which, like their other passions, daylight will dissipate.

RODNEY BANISTER

ENCOUNTER IN BAD WEATHER

Out of a reeking mist, immaculate
but bored, strolled Hell's tall dangerous Ruler,
and for emphasis a cadence of languid drizzle
drifted down the street lamps' muted aura.

Yet belled within that bitter and sardonic gaze
swung the torn night of his deep central anguish,
an evergreen delirium beyond our yare
deciduous grief, till, over parks where poor men doss
warmer in newsprint than the rising politician,
trembled the evanescence of one terrestrial hour:

and perceiving in that flaking infirm moment
the waning city's delegated, easy
guilt, the Devil, grinning, sauntered on
to cottages, and unslurred identity.

RODNEY BANISTER

SPRING

Nunc in pace, Domine, dimittis
For now my eyes have looked;
Have found the chapels of my faith
Are empty
The temple steps that I have paved
With sandalled obligation
Have now a tunnelled sound
As if long graves were caved below
The mosaic'd mumble of the marble dead.
The time has come, O Lord
For even now my eyes have seen
Epiphany walk down the garden
Young as the crescents of the crocuses
Crewelled in the grasses of Engedi

The time has come, O Lord
For now I know
That these my white wrapped wisdoms
Wrap stale truths, and proofs that passed for Truth
Afraid to burn the testament
Of Moses and a wilderness
With a garden's flaming roses

But let the prophets sleep their peace now
I am the last of weary ones who waited
Fated for the fiery Spring
Hoping that the faiths which wintered in my bones
Might marrow silently
Till yesterday I saw the youth
Fling bright and fleshed
Among the laurels of my pain;
And cried my fevered soul sing at the flowers of my eyes
Bloom to the spilled forsythia of skies,

So leave me leave to leave this love, now
Before Thy high salvation, like a waterfall
Fall on the sharp damnation of Thy people, now
Leaped from this child who walks
A tall unbounded tomb
Among the resurrection of the flowers, now.

L. E. BRATHWAITE

CARVE A PATH AROUND THE MOON

Carve a path around the moon
Noon will soon obliterate
Wound your love and saturate
All your love with mitigated hatred

Sigh and die and ply your trade
Wade defying death's tirade
Let a maiden raise her head
Let a maiden deftly tread
When she betrayed her love she said
Falsely, that her heart had bled
For loves fragility
But she had no ability
No natural facility
To sweep her hand across the sky
Kiss the ground and not know why
Weep and sigh
And sleep and fly
Or reap a ripened summer harvest
Gold and green sap burst of splendour
Endless end unspent and rendered
Endless by the bending comet.
When she gave her trust to me
Twisted with ambiguity
Did she think I didn't know
That the cattle breathing lowing
Were going valued somewhat under par
To the reeking abattoir

Gleaming in the bones of love
Little lies adhere like lice
Lies with voice of turtle dove
Clothe the bones of paradise

MARY DYER

ALBERTO ROJAS JIMENEZ VIENE VOLANDO

Among fearful plumes, between nights
and magnolias and telegrams,
between the south wind and the west sea-wind,
You come flying.

Below tombs, below ashes
below frozen snails
below the deepest waters of the earth
You come flying.

Deeper, among drowned girls,
blind plants and wounded fishes,
deeper—once more among clouds
You come flying.

More distant than blood or bones,
more distant than bread, more distant than wine
more distant than fire,
You come flying.

More distant than vinegar and more distant than death;
among putrefactions and violets,
with your celestial voice and damp shoes
You come flying.

Above deputations and drugstores,
wheels, lawyers and ocean liners,
among red teeth newly extracted
You come flying.

Over cities of submerged roofs
in which huge women unbraid their hair
with large hands and lost combs:
You come flying.

Close to cellars where wine matures
with silent, turbid hands
and hands slow, red and wooden
You come flying.

Among lost airmen,
beside canals and shadows,
beside interred lilies
You come flying.

Among bitter coloured bottles,
among anis rings and misfortune,
raising your hands and weeping,
You come flying.

Over dentists and congregations,
over cinemas, tunnels, ears;
in a new suit and with extinguished eyes,
You come flying.

Above your unwallled cemetery
where sailors wander lost,
while the rain of your death falls
You come flying.

While the rain of your fingers falls,
while the rain of your bones falls,
while your marrow and your smile falls,
You come flying.

Over the stones into which you are melting,
flowing, below winter and time,
while your heart falls in raindrops
You come flying.

You are not here walled in cement,
in the black hearts of notaries,
or the furious bones of horsemen;
You come flying!

O sea-poppy, O my brother,
O guitarist clad in bees—
there's no truth in these shadows in your hair.
You come flying.

Untrue that so much shadow harrows you!
Untrue the appearance of so many dead swallows
in this vast region of lamentation.
You come flying.

The black wind of Valparaiso
opens its wings of smoke and spume,
sweeping the sky when you pass:
You come flying.

There are steamers and a cold, dead sea,
whistles and months and a smell
of a wet morning and decaying fish.
You come flying.

There's rum, you and I, and my weeping soul,
no one and nothing but a staircase
of rotten steps, and an umbrella.
You come flying.

Distant is the sea. Descending at night
I hear you come flying below the forsaken sea;
below my shadowy sea-home
You come flying.

I hear your wings and your slow flight,
and the water of the dead strikes me
like blind, moist doves.
You come flying.

You come flying, alone, solitary,
alone among the dead, eternally alone.
You come flying without a shadow, nameless,
without sugar, without mouth, without rose-trees.

You come flying !

PABLO NERUDA

English version by ROBERT WELLS

DEATH ALONE

There are lonely cemeteries,
tombs full of noiseless bones,
the heart travelling a tunnel,
dark, dark, dark,
like a shipwreck in which we die,
like a drowning in our heart,
like a falling from our skins to our souls.

There are corpses,
feet of cold, chiselled slabs,
death extant in the bones
like a pure sound—
a bark without a dog,
proceeding from certain bells, from certain tombs,
growing in the damp like weeping or like rain.

Alone at times, I see coffins sailing to anchor
with pallid corpses and women with dead tresses,
with bakers white as angels,
with pensive girls married to lawyers;
coffins ascending the vertical river of the dead,
the violet upward-flowing river,
their sails filled by the sound of death:
swelled by the sounding silence of death.

Sonorously death arrives
like a footless shoe, like a suit without a wearer;
arriving to knock with a stoneless, fingerless ring,
arriving to call without mouth, without throat, without tongue

Nevertheless, his footsteps sound,
and his garments sound, silently, like a tree.

I don't know—
am little acquainted—
have rarely seen;
but I believe his song is the colour of moist violets,
of violets used to the earth;
for the face of death is green
with the pointed sharpness of a violet's leaf,
and the same, grave colour of an angry winter.

But death also travels the world dressed as a broom,
sweeping the soil in search of corpses.
Death is in the broom;
it is the tongue of death seeking the dead,
the needle of death looking for its thread.

Death lurks in truckle beds,
in heavy mattresses, in black blankets,
living at ease with an occasional sigh,
breathing a dark sound that swells the sheets:
and there are beds voyaging towards a port
where He is waiting, dressed as an admiral.

PABLO NERUDA

English version by ROBERT WELLS

IN JUNCTION

Who wait on windy corners, urgent twitchers,
The coming of relieving engineers—
Clearing a smooth-surfaced path through tangles
And scoring to the sea an easy pencil—
Roll up the news into a paper trumpet
And tally-ho your way down twilit stairs:
For screech of useless engine with bright screw thrust
Blindly into the sky as nose dips deep
Sharpens the teeth no fiercer than your raging
Impulse denied engagement in the bleak
Before-dawn that breaks through spasmodic dreaming.

PHILIP HEAD

THE MIRAGE IN THE SOUTH

The mirage in the hot eye of the south
Is this green saline wilderness of the north
With all its leonine bronze beaches roaring
Thrown upside down on cloud to claw the sky
So that the sweating crowd the blocks put forth
On Ludgate Hill or in the Strand outpouring
Gaze at the great coarse vision reared on high
Fearful as trampled worshippers and every mouth
Waters with loss and terror and desire
Of the harsh ancestral north and the norse lyre.

HUBERT NICHOLSON

A LETTER FROM THE EYES ABOUT THE HANDS

The hands are twenty-three years old in height
But worn like fifty. Their fingers are scarred
By mock battles and their nails cut and pared
For good society, but dream only of the leopard.
The gross and crude hands act but never speak,
Insensible, sleepy, limp hands that only keep
An elementary power to register forms
—Shapeless air, round coins, square books, sphered rain,
Indications of form without idea
—Not soft air, cold coins, good books, calm refreshing rain.
The hands, like certain poets, are happiest in abstractions.
They can't manage dictionaries. The hands are scholarly
And pedantic in a scholarly way. The hands alone
When I, keen eyes, was occupied with visions
Lay sullen by my side and thudded on the bone.

The hands should be taken very seriously. Only
Water escapes the hands. The hands are unruly,
Snatching branches from the tops of trees,
Always hot, warm, moist, soft, hard, and freely
Masquerading as polite under novel disguises.
Disturbed by harmony and desirous of the white keys
The envious hands wanted to make that music.
The hands must be taken into account. The irresponsible
Hands interested in violence. The conspiratorial
Hands that fire cannons and wield a hefty club
And score a bull's eye at the butts at half a mile.

It must also be said
That the hands are ringleader in a clandestine movement
That dislikes the tongue because it is an articulate
And useful citizen. The hands are not law abiding,
Seizing the ends of novels before the beginning,
Jealous when they turn the pages of great poets.
The hands, shaken by hands, are always quarrelling
With other hands. The hands are always trying
To do things which are absolutely impossible—
To embrace space, for example, and worst of all
The hands are regrettably apt to scavenge in graves.
They clutch, they brood, they clench, they disappear
Tearing up notes and somebody else's letter.

Finally, the deceitful hands
Are laid on the shoulders of both enemies and friends.
It is true the supple hands make marks on paper
But they obscure the meaning with fuss and bother.
All this began, I remember, at five years, when the head
Worried by thought, fell into the hands, and a smile
Of triumph pleased the hands. On that day of trial
The clever, knowing hands felt out
The contours of the skull.

F. S. GRUBB

THE CARETAKER

In this old house there often seems to move
A caretaker who walks without a sound,
Dusting the marble with his gentle hands,
And knowing well why all these figures weep;

In silence he so tenderly distils
The memories of all who ever spoke
In these high rooms now cold; he is the last
Lingering note of dancing's gallant love.

Here in the house of earth's forgotten joy
He walks, a stranger lonelier than stars;
The soul of dusk curls from the broken hearth
In words of smoke, the flame's most lovely dream.

So, crowded world, for him you hold no prize,
The homeless one whose home is always here,
Whose fingers save the last sweet rose from weeds,
His breath sad winds on the untrodden stair.

I. R. ORTON

DR. IMMANUEL RATH

Stamped with authority, a scholar,
This man of integrity, slow in the flesh
But painstaking in mental application, required his life
Consolidated by small ceremonies. Time to make sure
Of a sufficient amount of sugar in his tea, the canary fed,
Of the small pocket notebook carrying his list of daily requirements.
Time in fact to provide for
Duties and the slow exactness of his bodily movements; all
In order that a portion of the day might be set aside for
Study without guilt, delight without distraction.

For he was slow from the flesh,
But fresh as a schoolboy clambering on a loom,
His bastions of rubbish were earthworks
Where heroes turned to fight and classify.
Sunk in small echoes, handfuls of advice,
He bred his applications in the warmth he made,
Caressed and planted them like velvet pile;
For he loved his words and tied them to his fingertips
To glance and dazzle at his weakening eyes,
Trail through the sand, smear honey on his lips,
And weigh his teaching in a golden scale.

We know he took his pinch of dust and let it fly
To be a mote in sunlight no pupil there could see;
And before this angel came to spoil
His breviary, and to crack his seal,
He loved his words, no woman flowered for him,
Sheer multiplicity chuckled in his loins.

PETER REDGROVE

LAZARUS AND THE SEA

The tide of my death came whispering like this
Soiling my body with its tireless voice.
I scented the antique moistures when they sharpened
The air of my room, made the rough wood of my bed, most dear,
Standing out like roots in my tall grave.
They slopped in my mouth and entered my plaited blood
Quietened my jolting breath with a soft argument
Of such measured insistence: untied the great knot of my heart.
They spread like whispered conversations
Through all the numbed rippling tissues radiated
Like a tree for thirty years from the still centre
Of my salt ovum. But this calm dissolution
Came after my agreement to the necessity of it,
Where before it was a storm over red fields
Pocked with the rain and the wheat furrowed
With wind; then it was the drifting of smoke
From a fire of the wood, damp with sweat,
Fallen in the storm.

I could say nothing of where I had been,
But I knew the soil in my limbs and the rain-water
In my mouth, knew the ground as a slow sea, unstable
Like clouds and tolerating no organisation such as mine
In its throat of my grave. The knotted roots
Would have entered my nostrils and held me
By the armpits, woven a blanket for my cold body
Dead in the smell of wet earth, and raised me to the sky
For the sun in the slow dance of the seasons.
Many gods like me would be laid in the ground
Dissolve and be formed again in this pure night
Among the blessing of birds and the sifting water.

But where was the boatman and his gliding punt?
The judgment and the flames? These happenings
Were much spoken of in my childhood and the legends.
And what judgment tore me to life, uprooted me
Back to my old problems and to the family,
Charged me with unfitness for this holy simplicity?

PETER REDGROVE

LAND AND SEA

'Where may we rest from the faint tongues of the bells,
The Inchcape bell, and the bells of granite chapels
All day long on the cliffs; yet if we weigh anchor
How we shall long on the deep for a Christian burial.'
Such is the sailors' prayer, as far out to sea
They watch the bodies of unknown lovers, storm beaten
Helplessly drift apart; yet such little problems
Face every man who enters a hollow ship.

All day in every port some woman is lying
Lonely and vacant, wondering, 'I am alone,
All alone with the rain on my bedroom window;
Where is my handsome captain with salt in his hair
And where is my son. Alas. They are all at sea.'
Do not be jealous, Lady, do they love the sea
More than your arms or those of the harbour mouth?
They are all the same, love them, do not laugh at their stories.

What is the sea, after all, your boys go abroad
Forging through Time and Space to the world's end;
And yet in ten years or twenty they come to land
Here, or in other havens along the tide line,
You ask me then why they desert you so vainly?
Old sailors will tell you, who have settled on dry land—
That all men who go in ships are by nature religious;
But is the belief of those who remain in the sea?

Is it the prayer of those long under water
To stand again on the deck, keeping the watch?
Their voices like stale green bubbles of air, float up
Smile and are gone; Lady, where are they gone?
Are they banqueting even now with Sir David Jones
On starfish and turtle, and do they mock and mimic
When we swear at the supper table to save one from drowning
By leaning to touch the humming lip of a wineglass?

There are many legends told to recount the marvels
Done by your children, but one to explain their conduct;
Because they have had no father (Because you conceived them
For love or money) they have sailed to find their father,
Not to kill time or the mighty whale, but to discover
Why they were born. And then will settle, and buy
Their strip of land on the cliff, and hear contentedly
The small talk of the fish in the glittering shallows.

JOHN MANDER

HISTORY OF THE JEWS

Weep, weep, weep, O daughters of Jerusalem,
Make now the Danube salt, and Vistula sorrowful,
Shed tears at the source of Oder, now let the Volga
Be lashed on its broken wharves to a frenzy of grief;
Then let the clouds burst. Then let fresh water
Wash the caked salt away, the blood and the sweat,
Across the wide barren plains to be lost in that sea
Where may be found all sorrow from the beginning.

In the beginning your God made heaven and earth,
The dry land, the snake, the garden, and drove forth Adam
Lamenting the day; He brought the afflictions of Job
And caused his cry; it was He lifted up Jeremiah
To weep for your lot; He commanded the army of Titus
To plunder your city; and bade in the ghetto of Kiev
The blood and the sorrow mingle; and He stood by
When the Gauleiter stamped his foot for a bowl of water.

A man with his God on the cliffs in a great storm
Cried to the wind, 'Be strong, now let the darkness
Move once again on the deep and all be forgotten.'
So he despaired and wrang a small voice out of darkness,
The dying voice of a man who had not forgotten,
Faintly above the wind, a voice lamenting
Over Jerusalem, 'O city of bleeding stones
How long will you be content with unleavened bread?'

Weep again, O sons and daughters of Israel,
Can you remember a time when it was different
You, who remember further than any people?
Your tears in other times were the salt of the earth,
But why should you weep now? The sea is salt,
Your God died long ago at Jerusalem,
And now he has come again, the sorrow is different;
The spirit has walked on the troubled waters.

Who knows if the storm is past or the darkness broken,
Who knows the weather? Yet rise up, wandering people,
You who were never sailors like the Achaeans,
Knowing only the storms of God and the darkness of God.
Enter the ships, sail and come to your own land
(May Paul, Jew of Tarsus, save you from shipwreck)
The sand hills are long deserted by the tongues of Prophets,
But again in your hands they shall flow with milk and honey.

JOHN MANDER

